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ABSTRACT

This essay revisits Karl Jaspers' classic, "The Idea of the University." Jaspers was reinstated as president of Heidelberg University in 1945, and he presided over its rebuilding. His book, "The Idea of the University," written in 1946, was published in English 13 years later. It interprets an ideal of the university and emphasizes the purposes and responsibilities of institutions of higher education. The objectives of the university are identified as research, education, and instruction. To reach these objectives, scholars must communicate with each other and with students who, in turn, must communicate with each other. Jaspers is clear in his idea that universities need not incorporate all academic disciplines and all world outlooks, but the university must function as the "intellectual conscience" of an era and the meeting place of different disciplines and world outlooks. (SLD)

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by Cameron Fincher

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Recalling Karl Jaspers' Classic:
THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY

by Cameron Fincher

Jaspers, Karl. *The Idea of the University.* Edited by Karl W. Deutsch. Preface by Robert Ulich. Translated by H. A. T. Reiche and H. F. Vanderschmidt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.

In 1945 Karl Jaspers was reinstated as president of the University of Heidelberg and accepted the challenge of rebuilding one of Germany's great 19th century universities. Although forbidden to teach and with his life often in danger, Jaspers remained in Germany throughout the years of fascist rule. Scheduled for deportation to Poland, he was spared by the timely occupation of Heidelberg by American Armed Forces.

Throughout Germany its universities—from which over ten thousand Americans had received Ph.D.s prior to World War I—were in ruins and would require extensive reconstruction during the post-WWII years. In 1946 Jaspers wrote a brief book Die Idee der Universitat *that was translated and published in English thirteen years later. In his book Jaspers interpreted his idea of the university and gave particular emphasis to its purposes and responsibilities as an institution.*

Jaspers, as others preceeding and following him, was indebted to Cardinal Newman for the title of his book. Readers will find Jaspers' Idea *an interesting contrast to Newman's* Idea of the University*—first published in 1856 and undoubtedly the most frequently cited and favorably quoted book on higher education. As a philosopher, psychiatrist, and university president, Jaspers saw the university in a Greco-German light and not through the eyes of Oxford or Cambridge graduates. On a first reading of Jaspers many years ago, his views were mistakingly regarded as an effort to recapture the past in German history. His* Idea *is now perceived as the acceptance of an enormous challenge by a man of remarkable insight and perceptive judgment.*

Newman's Idea is still appealing to many of us who believe that knowledge is worth pursuing for the sake-of-knowledge alone. But 146 years later, Newman's book could not be listed as one of the 100 outstanding books on higher education during the 20th century.[1] *Happily Jaspers'* Idea of the University *could be and was. Thus, Jaspers' book is revisited in this issue of* Ihe Perspectives*, as Hofstadter and Hardy's classic,* The Development and Scope of Higher Education[2] *was in the previous issue.*

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Karl Jaspers' CLASSIC *The Idea of the University* is a remarkable testament to the intellectual life of scholars and scientists—when institutionalized by their orderly collaboration. Science and scholarship, as viewed by Jaspers, are meaningful only when they are part of a comprehensive intellectual life that is "the very life blood of the university. The objectives of the university are identified as research, education, and instruction; to reach these objectives, scholars must communicate with each other and with students who, in turn, must communicate with each other. Among the university's requirements for continued

existence, "certain realities" impose restrictions on the university's well-being. These realities are the varying abilities and attitudes of human beings—and the different needs and interests of state and society that influence their efforts to sustain the university.

Many contemporary readers will recognize colleagues, past and present, in Jaspers' discussion of faculty appointments. His depiction of the university as an institution has a timeless feature and his discussion of the university as an idea has an intellectual appeal that many of us still find attractive. Also, those of us who continue to interpret the idea of the university to younger generations can always re-read Jaspers for nuggets or gems that escaped us on earlier excursions into his writings.[3]

> *The university exists only to the extent that it is institutionalized. The idea becomes concrete in the institution . . . Yet . . . The idea is never perfectly realized. Because of this a permanent state of tension exists . . . between the idea and the short-comings of the institutional and corporate reality.*
>
> *(Karl Jaspers, 1946)*
> *See Page 5*

In Jaspers' University a single motive is at play in scientific and scholarly research: *the quest for knowledge* and *recognition that work is required.* The scientist and the scholar must learn and practice, thereby mastering methods of obtaining broader knowledge. Good intentions are not enough and their work must be "above and beyond mere industry." Both the scholar and the scientist must have an intellectual conscience and strive for conscious and honest control over their creative impulses.

Efforts must be made to relate "chance and isolated occurrences" to "a larger whole". Striving for continuity, scientists and scholars are as distrustful of frequent re-orientations as they are of absolute continuity along a single line of thought. Neither scientist nor scholar is concerned with what is merely fashionable or current; they cannot let others decide if their procedures are correct, but must rely on their own intellectual consciences. In their teaching they recognize the need of "teaching for substance" that only research can give. Here Jaspers states that "only he who himself does research can really teach."

The university's responsibility to promote intellectual work is based on the process of learning; empirical observation, study, and research; and an intellectual atmosphere, a human "give and take" that either *is* or *is not* there. In its professional schools, the university prepares graduates for jobs that can only be filled by people with a basically scientific outlook. Jaspers' use of the phrase "a basically scientific outlook" makes no distinction between science and the humanities—and is even more relevant to sociology, political science, social psychology, and cultural anthropology, as these disciplines have developed in American colleges and universities.[4]

The limits of science are acknowledged in various ways. Knowledge of the natural sciences, he writes, is not knowledge of Being and scientific knowledge cannot provide life with goals, values, or direction. For such personal values, we must look to other sources. Jaspers writes, "Science . . . is unable to tell us its essential meaning. Its existence is due to motives whose truth and cogency are themselves beyond scientific demonstration."

In his discussion of scholarship, particular attention is given to what he calls, "the philosophical point of view" and its implications for addressing "oneself to the whole". He believes all science to be philosophical in this sense but cautions that science should not neglect its ends for its means. Thus, "the philosophical impulse" from which research proceeds, *is* the idea that gives research its own value and ends.

In Jaspers' book we find much with which we can quickly agree—and much that we agree with reluctantly. We would like to believe

that the university is a community of scholars and students who are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, not only for its usefulness, but also because the pursuit of knowledge is worthy of our time and serious efforts. Knowledge is readily classified as pairs of opposites. *Theoretical* knowledge is often contrasted with *practical* knowledge; *empirical* (experience) is distinguished from *rational* (reasoning); the *general* is often compared with the *particular*; and *basic* or universal knowledge differs from *auxiliary* or relative knowledge.

TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

One of the more interesting discussions in Jaspers' *Idea* concerns the university's continuing growth. In 1803, he tells us, the city government of Heidelburg established a department of political economy with the university's philosophical faculty. Forestry, urban and rural economics, mining and surveying, civil engineering, architecture, assaying, and police organization were authorized in an effort to provide "everything that concerns the knowledge, preservation, development, and proper maintenance of public administration."

Economics was the sole survivor of the city's effort to benefit from the university's resources and services. Jaspers attributes the new department's early demise to its failure "to encompass a genuine self-contained sector of human life." Although the city's intention addressed a public utilitarian need, it could not provide *a unifying ideal.*

In 1946 Jaspers regarded the episode as the roots of technology's difficulties in finding its place in the university's curriculum. Although technology was "ages old", its value was unappreciated until it represented "an entirely new and developing area of human life." At that time, Jaspers could write:

> *The restless march of technological change on a gigantic scale makes us stagger between ecstasy and bewilderment . . . Everything seems to flow into one great stream of technological organization which for reasons which escape adequate historical understanding began to flow 150 years ago and to this day continues to swell steadily, flooding everything . . . Today, we feel that . . . all must accept its objectives at pain of extinction. (pg.93)*

Conceding that the best interests of the intellectual life, as well as those of technology, could be served by making the university their mutual meeting place, Jaspers trusted that both technology and the confusion it causes could be infused with meaning and purpose. Thus, he added, the university would in effect be transforming itself.

In a brief chapter discussing culture, Jaspers identifies a cultured person as someone who has been shaped by a given historical ideal. Culture, itself, is a coherent system of associations, gestures, values, and abilities that have become second nature to the cultured person. Cultural ideals "set their bearers apart" by differences in social class, intellectual interests, areas of competence, and training in languages, technology, and the natural sciences.

When culture originates at the university, it takes the form of a scholarly and scientific outlook—that is much more than specialized knowledge and competence. This *outlook* involves the suspension of judgment for the sake of objective knowledge and the ability to set aside special interests for the sake of impartial analysis. Standing for more than specific factual knowledge, a scientific outlook calls for a skeptical and questioning attitude and the continuous exercise of reason.

Jaspers is explicit in stating that "an educational ideal in which humanism and . . . the natural sciences are joined . . . for their mutual enlightenment has not been realized." He contrasts the liberal arts and natural sciences by saying that the subject matter of the former has more educational value than its methods of inquiry and interpretation. And to the contrary, the methods of analysis and explanation used in the natural sciences had more educational value than their subject matter.

INSTITUTIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

In its pursuit of science and scholarship, the university depends on "its ability to attract

the best people and provide them with the most favorable conditions for research, communications, and teaching." The interdependence of institutions and individuals is "never with tension" and thus, the university's wisdom, as acquired over the years, is dependent in large measure on the quality of the university's participants.

Jaspers cautions that it is always dangerous when an institution tries to reproduce artificially something they can only grow organically. He suggests that administration requires "a sense of intellectual quality" and an attitude toward intellectually creative people "comparable to that of a horticultural expert toward precious plants." In meeting presidential responsibilities, a different endowment from that of professors is required. The president must face realities with detachment and objectivity, derive satisfaction from what he have contributed to "a world not of his own making, but under his care."

In general, professors do not fulfill this particular requirement. They are intellectually committed to special interests and therefore are not sufficiently detached. Whereas presidents are tempted "by the feel of power, by their craving for recognition and gratitude," professors are inclined "to flattery and docility to get ahead." When approached with contempt, disrespect, or put in situations that "virtually impose unethical conduct . . . professors, like the rest of mankind, will eventually respond in conformity with the worst expectations."

In Jaspers' view, the polarity of individuals and institutions begets "opposite errors". On the one hand, individualism can result in a cult of personality, an undue emphasis on originality, or even eccentricity. On the other hand, institutionalism can result in an excessive emphasis on oppressive and empty organizational efficiency. To steer clear of either extreme, the university tolerates eccentricities, is receptive to new personalities, and strives for "a sense for rank and merit, a feeling of respect for age."

Accepting the tension between creative temperaments and the pursuit of knowledge as necessary for institutional vitality, Jaspers contends that presidents "must subordinate all considerations to . . . discovering and cultivating . . . intellectual vitality . . . and be ever ready to combat all opposite tendencies." In reconciling differences between individualism and institutionalism, he advises against simple solutions such as "separating research from teaching . . . pure from applied science, liberal education from specialized training, the instruction of the best from that of the many." Teaching and research do not simply exist side by side but go hand in hand. "This is an ideal which can only be realized by the work of complete persons."

The Human Factor: Accepting Jaspers' view that "all matters of intellectual culture" and "all of university life" are inseparable from human personality and character, we can appreciate more fully the interdependency of institutions and individuals. The "aptitudes, intelligence, spirituality, and creativity" of professors and students are essential to the university's vitality and its commitment to attract the best people. Administrators can be judged by the relative importance they attach to people and to institutions. And we can note, with approval, that one of the university's aims should be to ensure that "the best in the growing generation may be able to develop freely."

We can also agree that the most important factors in teaching may be an active intellect, the ability to grasp problems and to pose questions, the mastery of method. Jaspers cautions that when we speak of abilities, as "something definitely given," we may be "prone to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness." He is convinced, nonetheless, that "in every institution, there are differences of rank and authority above and beyond the obvious differences of individual caliber." He then adds that rational organization is unthinkable without leadership.

Living Up To The Idea: Jaspers is candid in assessing the various reasons why an institution, may fail to live up to "the idea" of a university. Even the "best of institutions are

Karl Jaspers' University: Idea and Institution

THE IDEA	THE INSTITUTION
Knowledge is the pursuit of truth	A chartered or incorporated creature of the state
An imperishable idea of world-wide character: academic freedom	A place where both state and society have an active interest and make concessions to further the purpose of seeking truth
A community of scholars and students engaged in a common task	A school of a very special sort with the freedom to learn and the freedom to teach
Truth is accessible to systematic search;	Research is the foremost concern of the university
Presupposes the intellectual maturity not just of the mind but of the whole man	Tensions between the living personality of the research—scholar and institutional forms are unavoidable
The idea without the institution is incomplete and isolated	All corporate bodies tend to maintain an unconscious solidarity against both the excellent and mediocre
To live according to this idea means becoming a part of a larger whole	The time and place for learning
Where the idea remains vitally alive, this results in creative change	Liberal learning instead of vocational training
Scholarship depends on a relation to the whole and academic disciplines are meaningless apart from their relation to the whole of knowledge	Once a new intellectual direction has been developed, the university will take possession of it sooner or later

apt to deteriorate" and universities are no exception. In some universities, "intellectual achievement tends to assume an air of finality" and the institution may consider itself as an *end unto itself.* "Constant re-examination" is necessary to ensure "the proper functioning of institutional structure on behalf of the ideal it is meant to serve." Other institutions may falter because, in its freedom to select its own members, an institution may maintain "an unconscious solidarity against the excellent and mediocre, prompted by fear of competition and jealousy."

Some institutions may fail because its "freedom of communications" degenerates into a quarrel between conflicting personalities." Others may become the "tools of scholars . . . who use their reputations, connections, and friends" for "ruthless" advancement." And institutions may fail because its "scholars are isolated as specialists in a field" and thereby discouraged from communicating with their oncampus colleagues (here Jaspers likens such faculty members to the monkey who protects the territoriality of his own palm tree).

Academic Disciplines and World Outlook: In closing, it is advisable to point out that his views of academic disciplines and *world outlook* may clash with later interpretations of the curricular controversies in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s. Without doubt, many of his thoughts about the university will be regarded as idealistic by readers educated since the 1960s. It would be fallacious, however, to reject the relevance of his views in the year 2000.

Jaspers is quite clear in his belief that universities need not incorporate all academic disciplines and all *world outlooks*. Isolated disciplines may come and go throughout academic divisions and departments, but by definition "knowledge aims at unification" and disciplines seek one another. In ways not always obvious, university curricula are organized to represent the unity of knowledge.

In Jaspers' *university* where research is its major purpose, discovery and research is an indivisible whole and scholarship depends on a relation to the whole:

> *To address one's self to the whole is . . . the 'philosophical' point of view. All science is "philosophical" in this sense, so long as it does not neglect the end for the means.*

Thus, Jaspers writes that the university is meant to function as an "intellectual conscience of an era" and is, in many respects, the "meeting place of different disciplines and world outlooks." We do not know what he would say about the current curriculum of the modern American Research University, but he would recognize within its organization, its faculties, facilities, and its diverse constituencies many features remarkably similar but significantly different to his *Idea* and his Institution.

ENDNOTES

1. Cameron Fincher, George Keller, Grady Bogue, and John Thelin, *One Hundred Classic Books about Higher Education.* (In Press).

2. Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy, *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

3. Cameron Fincher, "The Idea of the University in the 21st Century: An American Perspective." (*British Journal of Educational Studies*, 1993, Vol. xxxxi, 26-45).

4. See also Cameron Fincher, "The Influence of British and German Universities on the Historical Development of American Universities." (Edgar Frackman and Peter Massen (Eds.) *Toward Excellence in European Higher Education in the Nineties.* (Uitgeverij LEMMA B.V., Utrecht, 1992).

THIS ISSUE . . .

As an existential philosopher, Jaspers expresses a point of view that other existentialists never reached in the post-WWII years. Both his IDEA and his INSTITUTION are elitist and much too idealistic, but readers should never doubt that his feet were firmly planted on the ground.

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